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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000219

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BAPTISTS UNDER PRESSURE IN VILLAGES
IN LEBAP PROVINCE

REF: ASHGABAT 31

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Four Baptist leaders of nonregistered church groups in rural Lebap Province described interfaith tension and official harrassment in their respective villages. According to the pastors, there is growing Baptist presence, but local officials and Muslim leaders are actively discouraging people from joining the Baptist groups. The official line prohibits group meetings and proselytizing, however groups no larger than 20 persons manage to gather in homes without being disrupted. In addition to Islamic religious leaders issuing warnings against involvement with Christians, there were cases of school directors interrogating children about their religious activities and threatening them with being ostracized and expulsion. During a dispute over the burial of a Baptist woman, the province's chief imam reportedly called for the Christians in that village to be "killed like dogs." The pastors reported that their groups are growing, despite the pressure, but the tense situation shows no sign of abating. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) During a February 2 visit to Turkmenabat in eastern Turkmenistan, poloff met with the leaders of four village-based Baptist groups to discuss their activities and conditions for worship. Narmyrat Mominov leads a group in Galkynysh District. The local administrative authorities publicly warn residents against non-Muslims. Officials told one church attendee that the police keep the pastor under surveillance, trying to scare her and others away from the group. Authorities have also told people that they have no right to gather or to proselytize, only to practice religion by themselves. According to Pastor Narmyrat, being told that they violate the law frightens people. The local imam has told people that they are not allowed to discuss God, even in their own homes. 65-70 people gather for worship on Christian holidays, but they travel to the city of Seidi and meet in a private house because it is easier to meet in the city.

13. (C) Pastor Narmyrat had studied in Ashgabat, where he was introduced to Baptist beliefs. This occurred during the 1990s when missionaries were still allowed in the country.

After finishing his studies, he returned to his home village outside of Turkmenabat. He has since completed one year of studies at a bible school in Almaty. Local authorities accuse him of being a spy. His group has not tried to register with the government. A few years ago, when challenged by the authorities, his group showed a copy of the registration document for the Baptist church in Ashgabat. The authorities backed off that one time, but later said the document was only valid in Ashgabat. Pastor Narmyrat said he wants to talk with Pastor Korobov of the Ashgabat church about obtaining legal status as a branch of the Ashgabat church (reftel).

¶4. (C) Group members face constant pressure, including threats, jokes and unpleasant remarks about Christians. Pastor Narmyrat explained that to obtain registration, the group would need to submit a list of its members' names. People are afraid to be included because both they and their parents would likely lose their jobs. According to Narmyrat, getting a job requires paying a bribe of at least USD 500.

¶5. (C) According to Pastor Zarif, whose group is located in a village on the Azatlyk Farmers' Union in Serdarabat District, a maximum of 20 people gather at one time in a house. (NOTE: About 10,000 people typically reside on the territory of a farmers' union, which is made up of villages with between 2,000-3,000 residents. END NOTE) More than 20 participants is not possible because the police would come. When a group becomes larger, it is divided. Pastor Zarif estimated that only ten percent of believers gather. Others are afraid of consequences, or their parents or spouses do not allow them

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to attend. He said they suffer from a shortage of Turkmen language bibles, although they can sometimes get five or six copies. At their gatherings they play music from a computer, as well as accompaniment by a dutar (a traditional Turkmen string instrument) and traditional dance. Pastor Zarif said services are generally conducted in a manner consistent with Turkmen culture, with participants seated on the floor. He noted that the situation for his group became better after some minority religious groups were allowed to register in ¶2004. While officials currently make public threats to discourage people from attending the group's gatherings, there have not been any threats that targeted individuals. Pastor Zarif stated that people are allowed to believe and worship as individuals, but not to gather or proselytize. The farmers' union director will not lease land to known Christians, another reason that many believers are not open about their faith because they are afraid they would lose their land.

¶6. (C) Pastor Hudayberdi's village is located in the Amu Darya Farmer's Union in Halachi District. His church meets in house groups numbering from 5-15 people, with one group of ¶30. Pastor Hudayberdi explained that after Christmas and the school break, the school director summoned the Baptist children and asked them about how they celebrated and what they ate. The children sang some Christmas songs for the director. He then told them that if they repeated such activities, they would be kicked out of school. Pastor Hudayberdi said the chief imam for Lebap Province is opposed to the Baptist groups and looks for a reason to suppress them. In the summer of 2009, a group of provincial imams came to a funeral arranged for a Baptist woman who had been killed in an auto accident. The chief provincial imam did not want the woman to be buried according to Muslim tradition, nor would he allow a Christian burial. The imam asserted that the woman had betrayed the Muslim faith. According to the pastors, the chief imam tried to incite the villagers, openly urging them "to kill the Christians like dogs." The imam also remarked that the Baptists had "sold themselves to America." The corpse remained unburied for three days. Eventually, the person responsible for the woman's death, out of a sense of guilt, asked his relative who was a mullah to perform the burial. Following the

burial, the mullah was told that if he did that again, he would be in trouble. Following the burial, the chief imam sent a message to all the districts emphasizing that Christians were bad people.

17. (C) Also on the Amu Darya Farmer's Union, but in a different village, Pastor Rakhim remarked that his group faces the same problems as the others. Everyone in the village knows who the Christians are. "All kinds of slander circulates, that Christians are egoists, subjects of hypnotism, or paid to join." False accusations are also made to government officials. The group has about 100 members, who meet in family services, in a women's group, and sometimes in a park "like partisans." So far, they have not been caught. Pastor Rakhim also mentioned that the children from Baptist families were questioned by their school director. He wanted to know what kind of literature they had at home, who came to their houses, how many people came and which day. The director told that children that if they did not give up Christianity, no one would talk to them. When the parents asked the school director why he was asking such questions, he responded that he had pressure from above. A teacher who was not a Baptist was fired because his brother was a believer. When a Baptist family wants to hold a wedding, the farmers' union will not give permission to borrow tables and dishes, which are typically loaned for such large events.

18. (C) Despite the difficulties, the pastors affirmed that people continue to come to their groups and the number is growing. A lot more women than men participate. They thought the gender imbalance might be cultural, with men

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concerned about upholding a traditional image of the Turkmen male. The pastors also mentioned that women members had told them they attend the church because of its message of love, a word that they never heard from either their parents or their husbands.

19. (C) COMMENT: This meeting gave us our first real knowledge about the growth of small Christian groups in Turkmen villages. The pastors mentioned that Christianity is also attracting adherents in Dashoguz province. Nevertheless, while growing in numbers, we are still talking about handfuls of people in an overwhelmingly Muslim nation. While the pastors had first been exposed to Christianity by missionaries during the 1990s, the growth of Christian groups in the villages appears to be generated internally. The pastors acknowledged that this religious split creates tension in these villages on a daily basis. It seems that there are some authorities, both Islamic and secular, intent on repressing Christian beliefs, even to the point of inciting inter-faith violence. While none of the pastors reported instances of attacks against Christians in their villages, these villages could see potential interfaith conflict. END COMMENT
CURRAN